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Salma A. Nageeb

## Appropriating the mosque: women's religious groups in Khartoum<sup>1</sup>

### *Summary*

This paper discusses the case of women's mosques groups in the capital of Sudan which have considerably spread since the National Islamic Front (NIF) seized power in 1989. The paper empirically demonstrates how the mosque groups are forming a social space for women and how this is leading to the appropriation and transformation of a public-religious and a highly masculine space such as the mosque. The main argument of the paper maintains that the case of the mosque groups contests the undifferentiated view that women in Islamic and specially Islamised societies are (necessarily) oppressed and that the only way to question the unequal gender relation and power structure is by getting away from religion. The paper asserts that, on the contrary, women active in mosque groups are claiming (more) power by becoming (more) religious. Through this power they constitute a space, transform public and religious ones and negotiate their gendered position *vis-à-vis* social and religious authorities and institutions.

### *Keywords*

*Sudan, women's group, gender, Islam*

In 2002, almost thirteen years after the Islamists seized power in Sudan and activated their Islamisation project, a migrant Sudanese, who was interviewed for this study, identified one of the social changes he noticed in the capital Khartoum as follows: 'women's attendance at mosques is a new phenomenon – mosques were always for men. Now you see young and old

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1 An earlier version of this article appeared in my book 'New spaces and old frontiers. Women, social space and Islamization in Sudan' (2004), Lanham, Lexington Books. Thus this article represents a continuation and update of my research on the mosque groups in Sudan. I conducted a follow up research on the mosque groups in 2004 – 2005 under the umbrella of the project 'Negotiating development: translocal gendered spaces in Muslim societies', Sociology of Development Research Centre, Faculty of Sociology, University of Bielefeld. The research project is funded by the Volkswagen foundation, and directed by Gudrun Lachenmann and Petra Dannecker.

women coming at different times of the day.’ This paper focuses on the same issue: women’s mosque groups in the capital of Sudan.

According to the observation of this migrant Sudanese, women’s mosque groups are identified as a new phenomenon, however, women’s attendance at mosques is an old practice. Since the establishment of the Funj sultanate (around 1505), mosques and *khalwas*<sup>2</sup> in Sudan resembled important socio-cultural and religious institutions. Besides their cultural, social and political functions, they were indeed the centre of Quranic and Islamic studies. According to the gendered social norms, boys had a greater chance than girls to get enrolled in Quranic schools; nevertheless (some) women were not only able to get (religious) education; a few were even *khalwas*’ directors.<sup>3</sup> This form of religious education played a significant role in the processes of social transformation.

For this reason, the relation of women to the institution of the mosque is not new, and in many ways it reflects the dynamics of the social structure and the processes of social transformations within a specific social context. The novelty of the phenomenon of the women’s mosque groups – the subject of this paper –, which is indicated in the above quotation, is not to separate the women’s mosque groups from their historical context. Rather it is to help us focus on how women nowadays find a ‘new’ gendered way of (re)situating themselves, expressing their religiosity, their forming agency and negotiating the social order within the context of Islamisation in Sudan.

So, in this paper, I shall focus on how the religious groups are forming a social space for women at the societal level, and how this is leading to the appropriation and transformation of a public/religious and a highly masculine space, that is the mosque. I shall also show how the agency of the mosque groups is transforming not only women’s traditional and private spaces but also public/religious spaces. The point of this paper is to look at how women from different backgrounds claim an agency in a (formally) male dominated arena in an Islamised society. To do so, the paper will critically analyse the ‘taken for granted’ gendered division between private and public spaces by looking at how the example of the religious groups shows a link rather than a distinction between private and public spaces (Nelson 1970, Moore 1986, Boddy 1989, Macleod 1991 and Werner 1997, Nageeb 2004).

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2 Quranic schools were part of the activities of Sufi orders and were attached to a mosque or *zawiya*. The latter is a space for collective praying which is normally smaller than the ordinary mosque and unlike mosques a *zawiya* is not necessarily directed by an ‘authorised’ *imam*.

3 Examples of such women are Aisha bint wad al-Gaddal, who led a *Khalwa* in Tuti Island and Fatma bint Jaber al-Rekabiya, who taught Quranic studies at the mosque of Awlad Jaber in the aj-Jazira area.

Inspired by the work of Mahmood (2005) on the women's mosque movement in Cairo, the agency approach which is adopted in this paper goes beyond limiting agency to the ability of the actors – women active in religious groups – to disturb the gendered social order or resist male domination in an Islamised society. Rather, agency is viewed as the capacity to act, which is created by and becomes possible within a specific relation of subordination (ibid: 18-20). The form of religiosity of the mosque groups is a lived and experienced way of life based largely on everyday Islamic practices and the gendered position of women within the context of Islamisation in Sudan. Through this and by positioning their Islamic practices in the social field, mosque groups are able to transform the very nature of the space they occupy, that is the mosque.

The paper is based on an empirical research carried out in the capital of Sudan in 1999, and again in 2002 and 2004 to 2005.<sup>4</sup> While I participated in the activities of more than five religious groups in Khartoum, I gained most of the in-depth insights by intensively studying three groups, and by following the everyday life of women active in these groups.

The paper is organised in five parts. In the first part, the focus is on the relation between mosque groups and Islamist politics in Sudan. The second part is devoted to analysing the groups' activities and the way they constitute a social space for women. In the third part the discussion is on how the activities of the mosque groups are leading to the transformation of the mosque as a public space. The part that follows takes the discussion further, analysing how the agency of the mosque groups is situated in the wider social context. The conclusion sums up the above sections.

## Women's mosque groups: Islamisation project and gender

During the holy month of *Ramadan* it was possible to observe crowds of people heading for the mosque, including a large number of women, well covered with their *toob* (a traditional Sudanese dress) and *hijab*, carrying their

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4 Upon the request of most of the participants of this study, all persons remain anonymous. My accessibility to the field was rooted in my identity as a Sudanese, sociologist/social anthropologist and a gender specialist. These identities and my relationship (blood relationship, acquaintance or friendship) with many women active in mosque groups shaped my participatory observation in many ways: for example on the bases of my acquaintance with them, many participants were concerned that my knowledge about them and their lives is deep, including details that they were hesitant to expose. Therefore, they insisted on drawing clear boundaries between what is private knowledge and information, and what should be considered public and hence can be published.

*mushaf* and walking in quick steps, after breaking their fast, so as not to miss the *isha* evening prayers.

It was not only the holy month, which witnessed such a social change. A considerable number of women's groups known as religious or Quranic groups (*al-majmuat al-quraniyya*) continued to meet in local mosques at particular times of the week to realise their objective of studying the Quran and Islamic studies. Yamani (1994: 279) and Mahmood (2005) analysed the existence of similar women's groups in other Islamic countries, where women gather informally to further their knowledge about Islam. Both studies focus on how women's agency is shaped within patriarchal Muslim societies. Mahmood's (2005) profound analysis of the case of mosque groups in Cairo offers a deep insight into the struggle of women, who adopt an Islamic disposition, to situate themselves within the competing forces of Islamism, Western liberation and Arab nationalism. A closer look at the case of Sudan is considered here to highlight the relation between mosque groups and the state's Islamisation project.

The majority of the religious groups which I had access to, were residentially based, and usually unequally mixed in terms of class affiliation, the proportions depending on the nature of the residential area. In the case of the groups with which I had intensive contact, the class mixture was particularly clear because of the location of the mosque, which was constructed to serve the two neighbouring areas, an upper class and a poor one. The spontaneously self-organised groups of women were formed outside the state frame of the social non-governmental organisations, in the sense that they were not registered as organisations in the Ministry of Social Affairs, or the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) which is a government body regulating the work of non-governmental and voluntary organisations. They depended on individual resources and networking with relatives or other friends to support their activities. Thus, resources of the richer members of the group, like cars for example, were offered to facilitate the group's activities; for instance transporting teachers who came from different areas of the capital. Furthermore, the group's programme, schedule and content, were set in accordance with the convenience of the group and their teacher. The flexible nature of the groups' organisation allowed for the participation of women from different levels of education. Those who showed progress could be promoted to other advanced groups in the capital. The groups were sensitive to the nature of the socially accepted codes, for example, the way women dress when going out for these meetings. In addition, the objective of the meetings, i.e. learning Quran and the timing for the use of the mosque, guaranteed community endorsement for the group. Accordingly, their gatherings were legitimised and praised as a form of social activity.

Despite this seemingly independent status of the groups, the spread, popularity and activities of the mosque groups are in many ways embedded

within the context of Islamisation politics and project of NIF. Since the late 1980s, the Muslim brothers or the members of NIF were involved in a vigorous process of Islamisation (see Beck 1998, Nageeb 2004, Seesemann 2005). NIF raised the slogan of Islamisation in order to achieve the aim of imposing a particular vision of Islam on all domains of life. Islamisation involves a process of cultural homogenisation guided by the notion of (the) Islamic society and its way of life. Islamisation is the claiming of an authentic Islam, or the juxtaposing of 'the correct Islam' with ordinary everyday life as lived by Muslims in Sudan (See Westerlund 1997). So it is a process of acculturation and social restructuration. This process is creating distance from 'traditions', as they are viewed as not Islamic enough. At the same time it is promising a secure way of mastering modernisation in order not to lose identity.

The Islamisation process, or the 'construction of the *umma*' as the Islamists in Sudan call it, can be explained by using Appadurai's notion of deterritorialisation (Appadurai 1991: 193). The *umma* or Islamic nation represents a master narrative and a powerful vision of a 'possible life'. As in many other similar cases, the success of the Islamisation project depends on the participation of women '[t]hus the contentious question of what the position of women should be like and how they should live, is at the present one of the most relevant issues not only of discourse but also of everyday life in Sudan' (Seesemann 2005: 96).

To analyse the relation between the mosque groups and the Islamisation project, I will refer to two main discourses and mobilisation strategies, which are adopted by NIF. These are *ijtihad* (re-interpretation of Islamic texts) and *tamkeen* (empowerment). To discuss the first strategy – that is shaped around the Islamist discourse on *ijtihad* – NIF, which constituted clearly identified strata of intellectual elites,<sup>5</sup> focuses on the role of the intellectuals in the revitalisation of Islam in the present day. Thus, orthodox religious leaders and sheikhs are accused by NIF of advocating a narrow, restrictive and 'frozen' vision of Islam which is not able to meet the challenges of the present day. Khalfalla (2004: 111) argues that 'the movement [NIF] saw itself, therefore, as a vehicle through which this intellectual vanguard could establish a new understanding of Islam, exercising *ijtihad* to develop practical laws and procedures.' NIF's concept of *ijtihad* is rather fluid: The problems of Muslims nowadays are due to the misinterpretation of Islam; Muslims need to replace traditional Islam with the lost authentic one and the

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5 Compared to Egypt where the basic support for the Muslim brotherhood during the 1930s came from the urban proletariat and later developed among the intellectuals, in Sudan the Muslim brotherhood developed as an intellectual pressure group that basically focused on competing the leftist and secularist politics among students of universities and high schools.

latter has to be renewed according to the current situation of Muslims. Renewal or *tajdid* is thus at the core of the *ijtihad* of NIF.

Using *ijtihad* discourse and strategy, various social, cultural and political practices are (re)addressed by NIF to situate a new Islamic view of them in the social and political arenas. For example, the old civil war between the north and south of Sudan was reinterpreted as a holy war – a *jihad*. Extensive and elaborated Islamic frames were offered and spread, through the media, NIF youth and students' organisations and Islamic non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to change the public opinion about the conflict between the north and the south: from civil war to a *jihad*. *Ijtihad* practices and discourse are, thus, used in this specific case to: legitimise the call for a holy war, and support the Islamist policies towards the oppositional movements in general and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army specifically. *Ijtihad* however is not only used to impose the ideology of *jihad*. Various other issues which are central to the politics of Islamism are subjected to NIF's *ijtihad*. This includes issues which are especially debatable in many Muslim societies such as democracy, *sharia* law and women's participation in public life, and gender politics.<sup>6</sup> To focus on the latter, NIF's *ijtihad* is basically characterised by the attempt to find a balance between the increasing presence of Sudanese women outside the domestic domain and the requirements of their version of *sharia* laws and Islamisation project. Therefore, women's rights to education, employment and public participation depended on the observance of certain measures of religiosity, revealed through Islamic dress and abiding by the codes of public gender interaction (Al-Zubair 1994, Elbatahani 1994, Hale 1996, Alahmadi 2003, Nageeb 2004, Seesemann 2005).

What is important here is that *ijtihad* as a discourse, a strategy and a practice of NIF, paved the way for many other actors to readdress various issues, which were viewed – before the implementation of the Islamisation project – from a 'traditional' Islamic perspective. This includes the practice of women's attendance at mosques.

To consider the second mobilisation strategy of NIF, that is the discourse on *tamkeen* (empowerment), it represents a political slogan, which

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6 Here I refer basically to the form of *ijtihad*, which was translated into state's policies, practices and laws. NIF's *ijtihad*s in the area of women and women's role in public life is a controversial subject. The leader of NIF (currently in the Islamist opposition party of the National Popular Party after the division of NIF in 2002), Dr. Hassan El-Turabi was – and still is – advocating progressive Islamic views on different issues such as marriage and *hijab*. His *ijtihad* on women's issues was recently a topic on Arabic media and TV channels such as Al-Jazira, where he was confronted by various Islamic authorities, who condemned his opinions as radical and unislamic. His *ijtihad* on women issues was mainly significant at a discursive and intellectual level, as the policies of Islamisation were not activating many of his progressive thoughts. For more discussion of the subject see Seesemann 2005.

became a popular discourse, used by NIF political activists in general to reveal their view on political, social and economic transformations. It is widely used to mobilise people to adopt the position of NIF concerning West/Muslim relations.<sup>7</sup> Among many things, *tamkeen* entails adopting and strengthening the sense of an Islamic identity to be able to face and overcome economic, cultural and political forms of independency. To further elaborate on the meaning of *tamkeen*, it is worth considering the opinion of one of NIF's famous activists in the area of women's (Islamic) NGOs. According to the director of one of the biggest NGOs that collaborates closely with the state – *umm al-muminin*<sup>8</sup> –, who was interviewed for this study, *tamkeen* 'means enabling unprivileged and marginalised women to manage their lives in a better way. This includes also knowing better her religion, her rights and duties. In this way, women cannot "be played with" in the name of religion or [Western] civilisation'. Islamic knowledge and religious empowerment is considered to be central to the improvement of the social status of women. More importantly, *tamkeen* through religious knowledge is a means of popularising the politics of Islamism in Sudan. Accordingly, many Islamic NGOs working in the field of women and development are combining their activities with some preaching components. The missionary programmes of Islamic NGOs are implemented through activities such as Quran and religious classes, support of widows and orphans, and financial assistance for poor students. The systematic and intensive religious programme and orientation of these NGOs played a considerable role in changing and addressing the gendered traditional social norms and the position of women. Particularly, these missionary activities focus explicitly on raising women's awareness of their rights and duties according to Islam. Therewith, Islamic NGOs might provide women with a culturally legitimate frame to question their gendered social position. Notwithstanding, they load women with historical responsibilities of representing the Islamic nation and family honour as well as protecting their society from 'the Western influences and cultural invasions' (see for example Williams 2005, Nageeb 2004, Elbatahani 2004).

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7 The statement 'we came to abolish feudalism, sectarianism and empower the powerless and the disadvantaged' was used by president Omar El Bashir in one of his first official statements which he gave after the military coup on the 30th of June 1989. This statement became part of the official rhetoric used on different occasions to emphasise NIF's empowerment strategy. The *tamkeen* discourse is even used to frame specific social and economic policies such as *zakat* and taxation. The latter are advocated by NIF as 'policies for the empowerment of the poor', in Arabic *siyasat tamkeen al-fuqara*.

8 The name of the organisation *umm al-muminin* literary means the mother of the believers which is used to refer to Aisha the youngest wife of Prophet Mohamed.



To discuss the relation between women's mosque groups and the discourses and strategies of *ijtihad* and *tamkeen*, which have been discussed above, we have to emphasise two points. First, that the mosque groups are self-organised groups, which are formed without direct support from state institutions or Islamist NGOs. Second, that women active in these groups insist on a depoliticised frame of self representation. This is consistently manifested by women active in mosque groups through sayings such as: we 'only seek the way of God', 'want to know the true religion' and 'don't care about politics'. Such statements are repeatedly used by women when they are engaged in explaining and identifying the nature of their activities. Despite this apparently independent position of the mosque groups, there exists a link and a discursive proximity between the discourses of the mosque groups on the one hand and the Islamisation project on the other.

To discuss this discursive proximity and the relation between mosque groups and Islamist politics, it is worth considering the local discourse on *jihad*. *Jihad* policies, ideology and discourses are one of the most popularised agendas of Islamists. According to the popular discourse on *jihad*, men were called upon – in the first place – for *jihad* in the south, whereas women's *jihad* was clearly identified as '*jihad al-mara fi baitiha wa-fi nashr al-dawa wa-talim al-Islam*', meaning *jihad* for women is in her home, in the *dawa* and in spreading the teaching of Islam. This is a very popular statement that one hears almost everyday on either the Radio or TV. In addition, and as the findings of this research indicate, it is often repeated by activists in Islamic organisations while offering their educational programmes. The wider meaning of *jihad* – according to the Islamist politics – encompasses facing and challenging the 'enemies of God', who are against the establishment of the Islamic *umma* in Sudan. In particular, Muslims should defend Islam against enemies such as the Americans, Zionism, secularism, Communism, and even traditional Islamic authorities. Women active in mosque groups often use the statement about women's *jihad* when they discursively represent their form of religiosity. They also link to the idea of *tamkeen* when they refer to how being a member in these groups is an empowering experience. To give an example, Ihssan, a 44 year old member of a mosque group, expressed the following during a group interview,

because we were not learning Quran ourselves we were like cattle in the hands of the herd man. Now we know that we don't need an intermediary to reach the way of God. We can do it alone.

Mosque groups provide women with a socially and politically legitimate ground to challenge and question traditional social and religious authorities. They represent a space where the authentic Islamic norms, practices and modes of social interaction are set against both traditional Islam and non-

Islamic practices. In this sense, mosque groups are 'speaking the language' of Islamism and reflecting how the Islamisation project gets socially and individually internalised and integrated.

Recently in 2004-2005, the field research indicated more than a discursive link between mosque groups and Islamist politics and institutions. Mosque groups, that indeed started during the early nineties as entirely self organised groups, began to link up with various Islamic NGOs which are supported by the state. This includes the clear link between some of the groups, on which this research focused, and the organisation of Islamic *Dawa* (Islamic missionary organisation). The *Dawa* organisation, located in an upper class quarter in Khartoum, occasionally provides many groups in this area with gifts such as Quran and other Islamic books, which are mainly produced in Saudi Arabia, or offers lectures for the women's mosque groups from Sudanese as well as non-Sudanese *Dawa* activists. At the same time the organisation mobilises the women groups for various activities such as the collection of *zakat* and *sadaqat*, which the organisation redistributes in poor areas and regions. As will be elaborated on in the next part of the paper, this form of relation to Islamic organisations leads to the reshaping of the social interaction and relations between women active in mosque groups.

Yet women mosque groups continue to present themselves and their practices as mainly religious and non-political. The depoliticised self representation of the groups cannot be considered as merely a conscious strategy of women to distance themselves from the Islamisation project and the arena of politics in the sense of government and government institutions. Neither can it be argued that it is grounded on a 'limited' understanding of politics by women. Rather, the depoliticised self-representation of the mosque groups reflects how the agency of these women is embedded within the Islamised social and political structure. At the same time, this agency works beyond producing conformity to or stabilisation of the very Islamised structure in which it is embedded. Instead the agency of the women's mosque groups can be grasped by focusing on the unexpected results of how religious practices are leading to the questioning of the (Islamic) male dominated structures and discourse on which the groups are grounded. Furthermore, the agency of the mosque groups challenges the very division between private and public spaces on which it is based.

## The mosque: group interaction and women's social space

At the back of the mosque, in the section designated for women, between ten to thirty women gather to learn Quran and some other Islamic studies. Only when the lesson was conducted by a visiting male *sheikh*, who may have been a member of the *Dawa* organisation, did the classes take an official or

formal shape. Otherwise, the classes were generally relaxed especially concerning the teacher-women's interaction. The teacher was addressed by her name or at most by the title *hajja* or *shaikha*. The women were freer to ask about private issues and domains. Most of these groups chose a quiet time of the day to conduct their meetings. They carried out their mosque programme in the deadest time for men's presence in the mosque, i.e. between late morning and noon prayers or between late afternoon and early evening prayers. Consequently, the Quran learning session was usually expanded to include intensive discussions of social and political issues, like whether to contribute to the government campaign of supporting the *mujahidun* in the south or not. A common heated political debate among different groups that I visited was the event of the 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2001. World politics as well as that of USA were the concern of the groups, additionally they intensively engaged in discussing whether the attack on the World Trade Centre is an Islamic act or not. Similarly, in late 2006, I learned that the issue of the caricatures of Prophet Mohammed that were published by a Danish newspaper, was consuming lots of the time designated for the Quran sessions. Many of the women's groups were even active in organising the local demonstrations to condemn such an act.

Topics that receive high attention and are subject to intensive discussions in the groups are, women's rights in Islam, gender relations in the institutions of marriage and the family, as well as women and gender interaction in public spaces. To cite an example, one of the sessions that was dominated by a weighty discussion which generated a sense of relief for the women in the end, was the one focusing on *al-nisa* or the women's *sura*. The discussion was provoked particularly when explicating verse 34: 'Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made one of you excel over the other, and because they spend their property'.<sup>9</sup> The teacher explained that this verse does not offer men any rights over women. Instead the word '*gwa-moun*', translated here as 'in charge', meant that men should serve women, not exploit them. To explain she cited the following examples:

The doctor is in charge of the patient, therefore, the doctor serves the patient and treats him. The mother is in charge of the child, therefore, she cleans him, feeds him and plays with him and the servant is in charge of the house, therefore, he is supposed to serve it with cleaning, cooking or washing. Why is it different when it comes to women? It is the very same story and *sheikh* Sharawi, God's blessing be upon his soul, confirmed this explanation of the verse: Men are to serve women, they are in charge of them, not to deplete or exhaust them.

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9 Translated by Mohammed M. Pickthall, Albany.

This newly gained religious insight provided women with a sense of relief, expressed by one of the women as 'ignorance is a disaster, we kept believing what everyone says until we learned Quran ourselves'. In this respect, the women's groups were the space where women could question their gender relations without running the risk of being negatively labelled. Furthermore they turned this theoretical knowledge into social skills of bargaining and negotiating the gender relations in their individual lives. Utilising this insight, the women's religious groups provided women with a space where they could question the gendered social order without violating that order.

The groups also acted as a counselling forum, where women discussed their own social and psychological needs and sought each other's support. Beyond the comforting words or gestures which they offered to each other in difficult times, they were willing and able to find solutions to specific problems. To mention examples: there was one seeking the support of wives of influential husbands to facilitate the migration of her husband to the Gulf to diminish her family's economic vulnerability; there was another who appealed for social mediators to convince her daughter to keep her family together by going back to her marital home and trying to forget about 'the inescapable problems caused by her in-laws'. All the above were accommodated within the two hour sessions and the philosophy was explained by one of the women as:

The strong Muslim is for the weak Muslim, we all pass through a time when we are strong and are weak. Helping others gives life meaning and helps you to overcome your own problems, God did not say a meaningless word.

The religious practices of the mosque groups provided women with a sense of solidarity and a group spirit, which enabled them to face and address many of their everyday concerns in a collective way. The collectiveness of the group is shaped by a twofold process. On the one hand, as has been discussed above, women bond their activities and relationship with each other to a discourse on Islamic ethic of solidarity and support. This discourse gets translated into social actions and lived experiences that include social interaction in the mosque as well as other domains of women's everyday and social life. On the other hand, the collectiveness, oneness or even harmony of the groups is also shaped by an othering process. Women mosque groups see themselves as different from both traditional Muslim and Westernised women, who are not actively seeking the way of God like they do and who – as one of the teachers of the groups explained during an interview – 'treat Islam as a folklore but not as the governing principle of life'. The pedagogic component of the mosque activities is very significant as it locates the collective agency of the women's mosque groups in the social

field. This component aims at placing religious practices, which include a wide range of activities, from dress code and interaction in public, to sexual relations with the husband or eating manners, as well as (the) correct modes of social interaction. Consequently religiosity becomes a socially (and indeed politically) recognised (and authorised) frame and an objective that brings different women together. However, religiosity or the Islamic practices of the mosque groups are also grounds on which to achieve self-realisation and individual goals. This is clear if one follows the biography of those who started as members of the groups and later got promoted to the status of a *hajja* or *shaikha* (teacher or instructor). Those whose status changed – from members of the groups to teachers over a period of time, which is not less than 5 years – are mainly of a specific social profile. They have either secondary education or above, but not less, and they belong to well-to-do strata. While the groups have no formalised criteria of who can be upgraded to the status of a teacher, there are various factors which structure this possibility. Principally, those who manage to progress in their Islamic studies within the context of the mosque or Quranic groups can become teachers or instructors of the very groups. However, in reality, only well-to-do women were able to do so. This is explained by Nafisa, a 47 years old woman and one of the oldest members of a Quranic group formed in 1994. She said :

I never wanted to be a *shaikha*, it is enough for me to learn Quran. Those [who can become teachers of the groups] are having enough time not like me. They have Ethiopians [as domestic help] who do all the house chores. They have time to attend more than three groups' sessions per week and they can study Quran all day through thus they can learn a lot by heart. But those like me can hardly manage: we have a husband who wants his shirts clean, children who want food and a house which needs cleaning and some order. Additional to these, you have to run around using public transportations, we lack a private car or a driver who waits to take you from here to there. How can you then learn that much of Quran by heart? Allah knows, *Alhamdoli Allah!* He is there and He knows that I am doing all that I can.

Open conflicts between groups' members are consciously avoided and are tackled and accommodated at a very early stage by employing and activating Islamic solidarity ethic and discourses. However, conflictive interests between members of the groups can be observed. They might arise when the task of self realisation of a member of a group is perceived by the others as overriding the collective sense of the group. Mobilising private resources for the groups is appreciated as a religiously sanctioned attitude. However, mobilising the same resources for individual purposes such as achieving a higher religious status is occasionally viewed with a critical eye. An example of this situation is when the *Dawa* organisation announced one of its

advanced and intensive courses on *dawa* for women in 2004. Upon completion of such courses, women are awarded a certificate as *daiya*, that is, an authorised Islamic missionary worker. To become a *shaikha* in one of the Quranic groups, one does not necessarily need such a certificate. Notwithstanding this, the hierarchical ranking between a *hajja* or *shaikha* without a *Dawa* certificate and a certified missionary worker is important. For social mobility in the field of Islamic missionary work, a training certificate from *Dawa* is of a great value. Consequently their religious status and knowledge would be highly recognised (officially). The fact that only two members of the group who had studied this were able to attend the course, evoked a sense of competition and a conflict of interests. This is an example of occasions when class, educational and ethnic differences and inequalities between the groups' members were cited to explain subtle conflicts or competition.

Significant to note here is that this form of relations between mosque groups and Islamic organisations, such as *Dawa*, is gradually leading to the formalisation and hierarchical ordering of the groups. In the sense that groups which manage to intensify their link to *Dawa* (or any other Islamic organisation), often receive an authorised *Dawa* specialist to give lessons and when some of its members are awarded a *Dawa* certificate, they are then considered by other groups as 'advanced', 'established' or 'serious'. This leads to the hierarchical ordering of the groups in terms of which one is better linked to an Islamic institution. The success of certain groups in linking up with a reputable Islamic institution is leading to the hierarchical formation of the groups, which relates advancement of the groups to the social status and class positions of (some) of its members. By situating their collective and group agency in the social field, mosque groups are able to constitute a social space for women. This space is maintained despite conflicts that might arise when self-realisation endeavours of some group members, or the relations between a group and an Islamic organisation remind the others of social differences and inequalities. In the next section, we shall see how the agency of mosque groups leads to the unintended result of transformation of a (male) public and religious space.

### 'Domesticating' the mosque: transformation of a public space

The mosque was gradually being transformed into a mixed gender space if not a social space for women. An exemplifying situation in this regard was in the year 2002, when one of the groups was engaged in protecting the physical space designated for women at the mosque from being abolished in order to expand the men's space. At a session which I attended at the peak of this event, the teacher, who lived in the same area, asked women about

the progress they had made to prevent the move to enlarge the men's section of the mosque by breaking the walls that separated the women's space in the mosque. It was the clarification by the women of the preventive measurements they were taking against this move that conveyed the strong sense of political organisation among them. Some mobilised their influential husbands to protect the group's right to women's space in the mosque. Others invited other women's groups from the neighbourhood to conduct their session, in the morning time, in the very same mosque, to defeat the argument that it was an under-utilised space. For her part, the teacher explained that she was working on a statement to be issued from the Ministry of Religious Affairs against this move. Therefore, using different possible social networks, women were able to protect both their physical as well as social space at the mosque. Similar strategies like the ones discussed above were utilised, and most importantly a discourse on religious rights of women was effectively mobilised.

However, not only is the physical space of the mosque being transformed to include a space for women, but the social space is being reshaped as well. A case that demonstrates this is the one often cited by the group with which I had intensive contact. A woman described this example as follows:

The group there [in x part of the capital] is very good, and has very strong women. You know, they are taking their kids to the mosque with them and they make the *imam* teach them Quran while they are having their lesson. If we do the same, many more women with small children will come.

So, I decided to visit this group, too. In the company of a young mother who participates in this group, I entered the mosque. The young woman walked with her child to the men's section of the mosque. As it was not a praying time, there were only a few men in the men's hall; one was sitting in the middle of the room surrounded with about six children between the ages of four to six. The man was the *imam* of the mosque who led the five prayers of the day in this particular mosque. Throughout the two hours' meeting during which women were engaged in their lesson, I kept hearing the voice of the children repeating after the *imam*, short verses from the Quran. Women were indeed very relieved to have a sort of day care for their children within the mosque, where they can continue their activities but at the same time 'not worry much about who will stay with the kids, or what the girl<sup>10</sup> might be doing with them at home,' as one of the women explained to me. They managed to change the men's hall of the mosque into a short time day-care and to include children's hours within the weekly activities of the *imam*.

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10 Girl is a term locally used to mean a domestic help.

The example of the children's day-care hours in the mosque is not the only effect of domesticating or transforming the mosque space into a space responsive to the needs of women. Women, like in this case, attempted to make the mosque more responsive to their needs. What they tried to do, as has been explained previously, was to place some of their domestic activities in the public (and men's) space of the mosque. They domesticated the mosque not only by moving some of their domestic duties to it, but consequently handing this duty to a state employee, (the *imam*) during his official working hours.

Another example, which I encountered in this regard is noted in my field diary as follows:

Asma [another woman active in one of these groups], phoned me yesterday to tell me that today, they [the women co-participants in her religious group] are organising a small party after the session to welcome Fathia and celebrate her safe arrival from Cairo after having a medical check up there. Together with Asma, I joined the group and attended the session, which started at 10 in the morning. Towards the end of the session, I was thinking I forgot to ask my companion about the place where the small party would be held. I thought probably we would move to one of the nearby women's houses and have some snacks and drinks there. (...) While I was thinking of collecting my things and getting ready to go out, women started unpacking the extra bags and baskets they were carrying. I asked my neighbour about whether today we are not celebrating Fathia's arrival. She confirmed this and explained to me that they are doing it here at the mosque. And that 'for quite some time now we celebrate many things here at the mosque, everyone brings what she can prepare, anything even if only ice to cool water and then we sit here together and eat something little, send something to the *imam*'s family to eat as well, pray and leave. It is better than the extravagancy and big things at homes, you know they are expensive and one needs to work a lot to host such a group (nineteen women) at home. We make it simple and without too much expenses.

One could argue that the practice of serving foods and drinks in the mosque is not a new one, as it is a habit of many people especially during the holy month of *Ramadan* to take a tray of food prepared in the early evening for breaking the fast. However, this practice is strictly perceived to be men's religious duty. The logic behind it is to strengthen the sense of Muslim collective identity (and collect good deeds) by offering whatever one can afford to others who might be in need of it. Women are traditionally restricted from eating with non-relative men and eating in the public spaces.<sup>11</sup> Thus, women

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11 This is particularly the case with grown-up and elderly women. However, the younger generation is slowly breaking with this tradition, particularly young women who are studying at universities or those who are employed.



prepare the food and this is their contribution to the sense of Muslim collectivity, but it is men's duty to place it in the public space, be it the mosque or simply in front of the house door, for those who might like to join. The use of the mosque space by women as explained above is, thus, a new practice that came into existence after women increasingly claimed the mosque space. The logic behind it, as explained by the woman above, is to avoid unnecessary expense and to simplify the social nature of women's parties or gatherings, rather than to fulfil a religious duty. While this was my first encounter with this practice, it did not remain the last. Women continued to organise such gatherings at the mosque and the mosque is increasingly hosting 'domestic' affairs.

In the above discussion, the collective agency of the groups has been emphasised because it is central to understanding how the mosque is being transformed and how women place this collective agency in the male dominated space. However, it is, nevertheless, important to consider how the group itself interacts while 'domesticating' the mosque and what the different positions of women are regarding this act of transformation.

While the sense of collectiveness and solidarity were strong when women were engaged in defending their right to a physical space in the mosque, it was not so in the two other cases. Using the mosque as a day-care facility or as a space to celebrate social occasions did not go without dispute between members of the groups. The concerns of those who objected or who were critical about such practices were centred on the possible (male) perceptions and reactions towards the inclusion of non-religious practices in the mosque.

Asma, a 40-year-old mother referred to her co-members, who bring their children to the mosque as well as those who support this practice, as blinded by 'women's things, they are unaware of the difference between private places and public places like the mosque'. Those who oppose these acts hold on to the dichotomy between public (serious) work and domestic (not serious) work. Consequently, maintaining the publicity of the mosque – by avoiding conducting some domestic activities in it – would give their work of learning Quran and Islamic studies a status of being 'serious work'. Acts of transferring women's domestic and social duties to the mosque would threaten the activities of the mosque groups by being classified as 'women's things' and not serious work.

Women who argued against the transformation of the mosque did not manage to stop the others from domesticating the mosque. However, their oppositional stand made women, who were for the act of 'domesticating' the mosque, more conscious about their attitude. For instance, the task of cleaning up after having social gatherings in the mosque was conducted more consciously. Children were also often controlled by their mothers, who interrupted their sessions and ran to the front section of the mosque to signal to their children to be quiet, whenever they became wild. More importantly again, in this

case classes and social status' were used by members of the groups to explain why some women were opposed to the act of transforming the mosque. Those who opposed were classified as rich and could afford good domestic help, had no small children or had family members to help them with their mothering and domestic duties. Mona, a 39 year old mother who brought her son along with her, explained this as follows, 'their hands are not in fire like us, there are others who are doing this work [child care] for them'.

What has to be emphasised here is that this type of disagreement and conflictive interest was not allowed to surface and break or affect the group's collective identity and cohesion. Critical views, statements and impressions about co-members were basically revealed in the private and small circles of those who have close relations – neighbourhood, friendship or blood relationship – with each other. When the group members were together they tried their best to rationalise and accommodate differences and disagreements within the frame of Islamic solidarity and the ethics of social interaction. While doing so they transformed the mosque into a women's space.

## Transforming women's traditional social spaces

The religious knowledge and status that the women active in these religious groups are able to accumulate can be seen as a social and cultural force. This force is not only transforming the mosque space by 'domesticating' it but the process of (re)placing and social (re)positioning of the religious women involves a wider form of social transformation, namely the transformation of 'traditions' and 'traditional' spaces.

I also attended a series of sessions with one of the religious groups from my neighbourhood. One of the reasons that made me join in was the women's great excitement about the visiting *sheikh*, who is a known religious figure. The visiting *sheikh* who was teaching the group for four consecutive sessions on 'religion is conduct', indicated how the group should interact in these 'traditional' social spaces:

My Muslim sisters, you go to weddings and funerals, and you can see with your very same eyes how people are turning away from Islam. Muslims vie, boasting with their food, clothes, furniture and houses. Refrain from boasting that God favours the Muslim only on the basis of his religion. Help your other sisters to refrain from what makes religion die in the hearts of weak Muslims. It is a good phenomenon to see some of you refrains from gossip and nonsensical talk with other women at social occasions but preferring to recite Quran, or talking about religious issues. Follow the good model of conduct and refrain from what makes God angry and what makes the Muslim nation weak ...

I was invited to the naming party of a grandson of one of the women (Dalia, 40 years) who was very active in religious groups (see Nageeb 2004). Although she was very busy with her social duties as hostess, she made the time and the space to indicate a redefinition of the occasion. The lunch invitation was extended to a large number of men and women, served separately. A female singer, who was to entertain only the women, was the only compromise that the family reached after long negotiations. Dalia's children, including her son-in-law, wished to have a bigger night-time party with a male singer and a relaxed gender spacing arrangement. Dalia however persistently refuted the idea, and only reluctantly accepted the idea of a female singer while keeping to segregative space arrangement. During a break the singer took from her entertainment job and Dalia from her work as hostess, Dalia carried in her new grandchild and joined the sub-group of her friends from the religious group. A few moments after she found her space there, the voice of women praying, reciting special parts of the Quran and chorusing '*amin*' travelled all through the women's space. The louder the praying and Quran recitation, the more attention was attracted to this small group. A large number of women started to cluster around Dalia and her friends, standing and sitting around them, and Dalia proudly said, 'It is our turn to celebrate the baby, you all say *amin*, let the blessing of the prayers go to all of you and to all to whom you wish goodness.'

The praying continued, and each of the 'religious' women had their turn to lead the prayers. By this time the crowd had become even larger, and now even included the female singer with her hands up to the sky. The focus on the well-being, health and future of the baby shifted to include prayers for the well-being of everyone, success for their children, health for their husbands and the wish for the joy of joining the Prophet Mohammed in heaven. The act produced a high level of emotion among the women's crowd (to the extent that the first song with which the singer started after her break was a religious one, mainly a tribute to the Prophet Mohammed). Dalia was very satisfied with the accomplishment of this move, as it changed the whole atmosphere of the occasion.

This was not the only encounter that made religious women remind others of *Allah*. At a wake in my neighbourhood, I noted how women active in the religious groups murmured to the grown-up grandchild of the deceased person that it might be better to recite and invite others to recite Quran than to keep on crying.<sup>12</sup>

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12 The changes in the wake sermonised in rural Sudan have been studied by Klein-Hessling (1999), her analysis is in line with this discussion.

However, there were conflicting views about redefining women's social spaces as women's religious spaces. An elderly woman expressed this view when she said:

Even the prophet cried when his son Ibrahim died, these women are holding to religion without knowing it right. They suppress our breath wherever we go, 'Don't cry, read Quran', the other day I shouted at one of them – I told her that she has nothing to do with what is between me and *Allah*. Crying is crying and worshipping is worshipping.

Some others, who were not necessarily organised in any sense along a religious or political line, but submitted to its superiority over 'tradition', were inclined to the view that 'it is good to keep away from gossiping and chatting, all of it is a sin. When our daughters learn the right way, they can also show it to us'. A third group with which I had the opportunity to exchange views on this matter were stricter in their 'religious' classification:

This is a *bid'a*, specially reading Quran sections in groups to pray for dead Muslims. It was never done either during the Prophet's lifetime, or the time that followed. After all, Muslims must be careful with what they innovate. Each can read Quran, the whole of it, for her dead people, but sitting in groups while others are talking or laughing without respect for the Holy Book, this can never be a religious way, it is a *bid'a* of the *kizan*. Like *ars el shaheid*<sup>13</sup>, they don't know enough of the religion but they keep on innovating. Innovation in Islam has rules and regulations; it is not for everybody to do.

At any rate, women in the religious groups remained a social agent involved in reshaping and redefining the social occasions along the lines of the newly gained religious knowledge. The move inspired not only the classification of social occasions as a space to 'follow the model of the good Muslims' according to the *sheikh's* advice. Social occasions were also the space whereby the socially growing women's religious groups strive to legitimise their knowledge and social presence. Redefining social occasions was an act that on an individual level, unveiled the social hierarchical change that women

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13 Literally translated as the 'wedding of the martyr'. It is one of the slogans used by the activists of the NIF to redefine the wakes of those who were killed in the war as a wedding rather than a wake. In such a case, the activists move with their drums, singers and gifts to the family concerned. There they present their monetary and other gifts, deliver speeches about *jihad* and martyrdom, sing for the martyr, who is believed to be granted seventy virgin wives in heaven. Hence his death must be celebrated, not grieved over. Activists usually interfere in the 'traditional' way of expressing grief; in some cases they even take the lead in presenting the visitors with sweets and dates, the last thing to be considered acceptable on such occasions.

were able to achieve by including religiosity as another criterion of social differentiation and the legitimisation of social power.

## On being 'religious': a conclusion

'Being religious' formed the way the groups distinguished themselves, built their symbolic capital, took a place in the hierarchy and accordingly legitimised their struggle for a social space. The objective of the groups validated women's use of the mosque and granted them a physical space in it. It also legitimised their demand for time to partake in the group activities and sanctioned their social and physical mobility to follow up a warranted cause. The cultural – and indeed also the religious – disposition of the groups enabled them to compete with other social forces, particularly those who are defined as traditional Muslims. By situating this disposition in the social field, women managed to establish their social space.

The case of the mosque groups shows how it is central to also focus on the link rather than the distinction and separation between private and public spaces, when studying women in Islamised societies. The transformation of a highly public and male space like the mosque to be more responsive to the way women are socially domesticated is a case in hand. Similarly significant are the ways in which 'traditional' women's spaces are (re)defined as spaces to position the 'new' religiosity in the social field. In this sense, no social space remains purely 'private', 'public', 'domestic', 'religious' or 'traditional'. Boundaries are constantly subject to processes of transformation, redefinition and restructuration.

The case of the mosque groups contests the view that women in Islamic and specially Islamised societies are (necessarily) oppressed and victimised and that the only way to question the unequal gender relation and power structure is by getting away from religion. On the contrary, the case of the mosque groups shows how (some) women, in the context of an Islamised society, are claiming (more) power by becoming (more) religious. Through this power they create a space, transform public and religious ones and negotiate their gendered position *vis-à-vis* social and religious authorities and institutions. The case of the mosque groups reflects how Islamisation politics and ideologies are penetrating and restructuring society. However, at the same time, the agency of these groups demonstrates how unintended acts – such as 'domesticating' or transforming the mosque, which in this case were caused by the subordinate position of women, are central to understanding how Islamisation politics leads to social transformation.

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## **Zusammenfassung**

Seit der Machtübernahme der National Islamic Front (NIF) 1989 bildeten sich in den Moscheen der Hauptstadt des Sudan immer mehr Frauengruppen. Der vorliegende Beitrag vermittelt, auf welche Weise diese Moscheegruppen gesellschaftlichen Raum für Frauen herstellen, sich den religiös-öffentlichen, männlich bestimmten Raum der Moschee aneignen und ihn transformieren. Die Autorin betont, dieses Fallbeispiel der Moscheegruppen widerspreche der undifferenzierten Ansicht, Frauen in islamischen und speziell in islamistischen Ländern seien (notwendigerweise) unterdrückt und die Infragestellung ungleicher Geschlechterbeziehungen und Machtstrukturen setze eine Abwendung von der Religion voraus. Das Gegenteil sei der Fall: Frauen, die in Moscheegruppen aktiv sind, beanspruchen (mehr) Macht, indem sie religiös(er) werden. Sie transformieren öffentliche und religiöse Räume und handeln mit sozialen und religiösen Autoritäten und Institutionen geschlechtsspezifische Positionen aus.

## **Schlüsselwörter**

*Sudan, Frauengruppe, Gender, Islam*

## Résumé

Depuis la prise du pouvoir du National Islamic Front (NIF) en 1989, des groupes de femmes de plus en plus nombreux se forment dans les mosquées de la capitale du Soudan. Cet article montre de quelle manière ces groupes créent un espace social pour les femmes qui les conduit à s'approprier l'espace public religieux dominé par les hommes de la mosquée et à le transformer. Pour l'auteure de cet article, le cas de ces groupes de femmes dans les mosquées contredit l'idée que les femmes dans les pays musulmans et en particulier dans les pays islamistes seraient (nécessairement) opprimées et que le seul moyen de remettre en cause l'inégalité homme/femme et les structures de pouvoir serait de se détourner de la religion. L'auteure montre au contraire que les femmes actives dans ces groupes exigent plus de pouvoir, en devenant plus religieuse. Grâce à cela, elles transforment les espaces publiques et religieux et négocient des positions spécifiques au genre avec les institutions et autorités sociales et religieuses.

## Mots clés

*Soudan, groupe de femmes, genre, Islam*

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